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NBC Nightly News

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SUBJECT Covert Anti-Terrorist Organizations

JOHN PALMER: Sources in Washington confirmed to NBC News today that the United States last year set up a covert anti-terrorist organization in Beirut to make preemptive strikes against suspected terrorists. And the Washington Post reports today that the group was hastily disbanded earlier this spring after one of its units went on an unauthorized mission that cost the lives of 80 people in Beirut.

More from Anne Garrels in Washington.

ANNE GARRELS: Secretary of State Shultz, who's currently traveling in the Middle East, would not comment on the report. He did, however, reiterate his strong stand against terrorism.

SECRETARY OF STATE GEORGE SHULTZ: I do have a very strong view about terrorism, as is well known. And I also have the view that at this stage, actions will speak a lot louder than words.

GARRELS: And sources confirm that after terrorists repeatedly bombed American targets in Lebanon, the Administration, through the CIA, launched a covert counter-terrorism program there, training Lebanese to stop terrorists before terrorists strike Americans.

Such action was justified by National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane earlier this year. The U.S., he said, can not and will not abstain from forcible action to prevent, preempt, or respond to terrorist acts.

Do preemptive strikes violate the presidential ban on

U.S. involvement in assassinations? House Intelligence Committee member Richard Cheney says no, if there's good information.

REP. RICHARD CHENEY: I think we have to be prepared, having developed that intelligence, to act upon it. I think we ought to have the capacity, if you will, to retaliate against terrorists, and hopefully, if possible, to head off those attacks before they occur.

GARRELS: But on March 8th the Lebanese counter-terrorism program reportedly took on a life of its own. Without CIA authorization, U.S.-trained Lebanese are said to have bombed the Beirut residence of a suspected terrorist. Eighty were killed in the bombing, 200 wounded. The suspected terrorist leader escaped. The U.S.-backed program was scrapped.

According to U.S. officials, the whole terrorism issue is a nightmare. There's a fine line between preemptive strikes against terrorists and assassinations. And in Lebanon in particular, there's no guaranty that those the U.S. trains will do only what the U.S. wants.